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SUBJECT: NEW SUGHD GOVERNOR PRIORITIZES TRANSPARENCY

¶1. The Sughd region's new governor is instituting transparent practices and other democratic principles in the local government. In his first speech as Governor, Abdukhir Nazirov told the Sughd public that his priority was to make the government's actions transparent. Tajikistan's three regions, Sughd, Khatlon and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region all have governors appointed by the president. In the country's power structure, their authority ranks just below the prime ministerial level.

¶2. Nazirov is a breath of fresh air compared to his predecessor Kasim Kasimov. During PolOffs' visit to the region February 14-16, interlocutors from independent news agencies, local governments, political parties and non-governmental organizations all remarked on the positive outlook for human rights, freedom of the press, democracy and economic development. They cited examples of how in the governor's short tenure they have already begun to operate without fear of government censorship.

¶3. Since entering office in November 2006, Nazirov has given open press conferences, inviting all members of the press including independent media. A presidential decree mandates all government agencies hold regular press conferences; however, many officials do not abide by the rule. The previous Sughd Governor requested journalists provide questions ahead of time and would not invite independent media or journalists critical of the administration. Nazirov has changed all that. Journalists do not have to provide questions in advance, Nazirov himself conducts the conference, and the media are allowed to report on any story they choose, even if it is critical. The heads of Varorud News Agency and CM-1 television, two independent media organizations, directly attributed the more open media environment in Sughd to the governor's respect for freedom of the press.

¶4. As opposed to the previous governor who appointed key staff, Nazirov advertises open positions, interviews candidates and hires staff based on their applications, experience and merit, not personal connections. A competitive hiring practice shows transparency and the beginnings of a meritocracy, breaking with the tradition of nepotism and corruption and leading to a more qualified staff. Ilhomi Jamoliyon, Nazirov's press secretary, headed Varorud News Agency before joining the governor's staff. Jamoliyon's office initiates press briefings before and after important events and delegation visits, a routine and essential practice for any press office, but not employed in previous administrations.

15. In February 2007, the governor ran for a position in the regional parliament. Although he is new to the area with no real local power base, he ran unopposed and won the election. He may eventually be selected for a seat in the national parliament as well. In the Tajik system, he can serve both as governor and a member of parliament. Nazirov also plans on creating a civic council comprised of the region's leaders from all backgrounds and political parties, nominated by the public. As the former Minister of Water for Tajikistan, Nazirov will continue working on transboundary water issues in the Sughd region, soothing relations with Uzbekistan on Syr Darya river usage. Nazirov also is exploring creating a free economic zone to stimulate business development in Sughd.

16. COMMENT: Nazirov's even-handed and transparent approach to governing the Sughd region may be a tactical concession by the central government in Dushanbe. The Sughd region was formerly the seat of national power, and civil society and media in the region have frequently criticized the government since power transferred to the south after the civil war. Under the previous governor, this resulted in the government taking a strong-arm approach to cracking down on "opposition." Media reports recorded several examples of political party members detained and imprisoned and incidents of torture. By appointing Nazirov, the president maintains firm control over the region, while allowing enough new freedom to keep the public from becoming angry over unjust government actions of the previous governor's regime. The powers in Dushanbe want to avoid both an Andijon-like public uprising and more people turning to underground organizations such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir. END COMMENT.

JACOBSON